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Häusermann, Silja ; Wüest, Bruno ; Kurer, Thomas

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The hidden side of declining turnout: how constrained government depresses participation among highly educated citizens

Silja Häusermann, Bruno Wueest and Thomas Kurer

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Abstract

What are the effects of the economic crisis on electoral turnout? Existing studies on participation focus almost exclusively on the losers of the crisis when addressing this question, i.e. voters with low socio-economic resources. Thereby, they overlook that in countries that have been hit hard by the crisis, turnout has declined substantially among the *highly skilled citizens*. Neither resource- nor conflict-theory of political participation can account for this.

In this paper, we propose a new explanation: anticipation of government inefficacy. Where economic austerity constrains governments, highly educated citizens with the necessary political knowledge and sophistication anticipate the inefficacy of the future government and they factor this knowledge in when deciding about electoral participation. Therefore, the positive effects of education on turnout decline with increasing international and domestic austerity constraints. We provide cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence for this argument on the basis of ESS data between 2006 and 2012, as well as different measures of government constraint in 28 European countries.

1. Introduction

What are the effects of the economic crisis on electoral turnout? While an increasing literature studies the effects of the great recession on government reactions (Pontusson and Raess 2012, Armingeon 2012) or on the impact of economic voting on election results (Fraile and Lewis-Beck 2013), we know little about the crucial steps preceding government formation, let alone government policies, i.e. the question whether and why people in the ongoing economic crisis participate at all in the election of a new government. Given the concerns that many scholars have recently raised about the impact of increasing inequality and austerity on democratic legitimacy and responsiveness (Anderson and Beramendi 2012; Streeck and Mertens 2013; Schäfer 2013; Mair 2013; Offe 2013), this question seems of utmost importance and topicality.

The literature suggests an effect of economic hardship on aggregate electoral turnout (Martins and Veiga 2012), but remains ambivalent with respect to the direction of the effect. On the one hand, it could be that citizens more strongly feel the need and desire to express their grievances at the polls – the “*mobilization-effect*” of a strained economic context (Schlozman and Verba 1979). On the other hand, however, citizens may turn away from politics out of a lack of resources or shifting priorities – the “*withdrawal effect*” of economic hardship (Rosenstone 1982). The development of aggregate turnout levels so far is indeed inconclusive. Some hard hit countries, e.g. Ireland, show an increase in aggregate turnout, while we observe a sharp drop in others, e.g. Spain or Greece.¹

The ambivalence of these results point to a blind spot of both mobilization- and the withdrawal-theories. They neglect that economic downturns do not affect all parts of the society in the same way. Moreover, even if they did, the reaction of different social groups to economic hardship may still vary according to their social, economic or cognitive resources. Thereby, countervailing effects may happen simultaneously and overcompensate each other in varying ways, suggesting the conclusion that there is no link at all between economic performance and turnout. Yet, there is a very high chance that such a conclusion would be simply wrong.

¹ Sources: Döring and Manow (2012), Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Political Data Yearbook.

This is why we argue in this paper that we need to distinguish theoretical mechanisms linking the crisis to participation for *different social groups*. More specifically, we focus on the changing behavior of citizens with high levels of socio-economic and cognitive resources. These citizens used to be the champions of participation in the democratic process. We show that electoral turnout among the highly educated has dropped considerably in most countries that have been hardly hit by the crisis. Since existing resource- and incentive-based theories focus mostly on the behavior of citizens with low socio-economic resources (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, Blais 2006), they are ill equipped to account for this development, as they would expect either stable or even increasing levels of participation among the better-off.

Therefore, we propose and test a new argument to account for the “hidden side” of declining turnout: where economic austerity constrains governments, highly educated citizens with the necessary political knowledge and sophistication anticipate the inefficacy of the future government and may decide to abstain, because they do not believe that election results will matter. Consequently, the positive effects of education on turnout should decline with increasing international and domestic austerity constraints. This is indeed what we find in this paper, based on multilevel analyses of the determinants of individual turnout: when crisis constraints were particularly strong, (in 2008 and 2010) participation levels among the highly educated dropped, as compared to the pre-crisis period (2006). Since these levels recovered after the constraints were somewhat relieved (in 2012), we interpret our findings as evidence for a crisis-induced, cyclical effect, rather than a more general long-term disaffection from politics among the highly educated.

Our paper is structured as follows. We start with our puzzle, the drop in participation among the highly education, which existing theories are unable to account for. We then develop our own theoretical argument with reference to theories of economic voting, before testing it empirically by means of a hierarchical regression model.

2. The puzzle: electoral participation among the highly educated in times of crisis

Figure 1 shows that turnout among the highly educated has dropped substantially in most countries that have been severely hit by the crisis. We clearly see a negative correlation between the government deficit in 2010/2011 (as an indicator of the crisis) and the change in turnout between 2006 and 2010. In the sample of countries available (Greece and Italy, notably, could not be included because they are not in the ESS for these years), Ireland had the strongest drop in public finances, with a deficit of almost 14 percent. Participation among the high skilled dropped by almost 5 percent. Similar reductions in turnout could be observed in Portugal, France and Belgium. In Austria, Cyprus, Slovenia and Hungary, which were strongly affected by the crisis, as well, electoral turnout among the high skilled dropped even more massively, by 5-10 percent. In other crisis countries, such as the UK, Spain or Poland, turnout remained relatively stable or increased very slightly. However, the overall picture is clearly one of declining turnout among the more privileged strata of citizens.

This drop in participation among those citizens that actually do have the necessary social, economic and cognitive resources to participate in elections leaves us with a puzzle that none of the existing theories can account for. Rather, existing theories would predict stable or even increasing levels of participation among the highly educated.

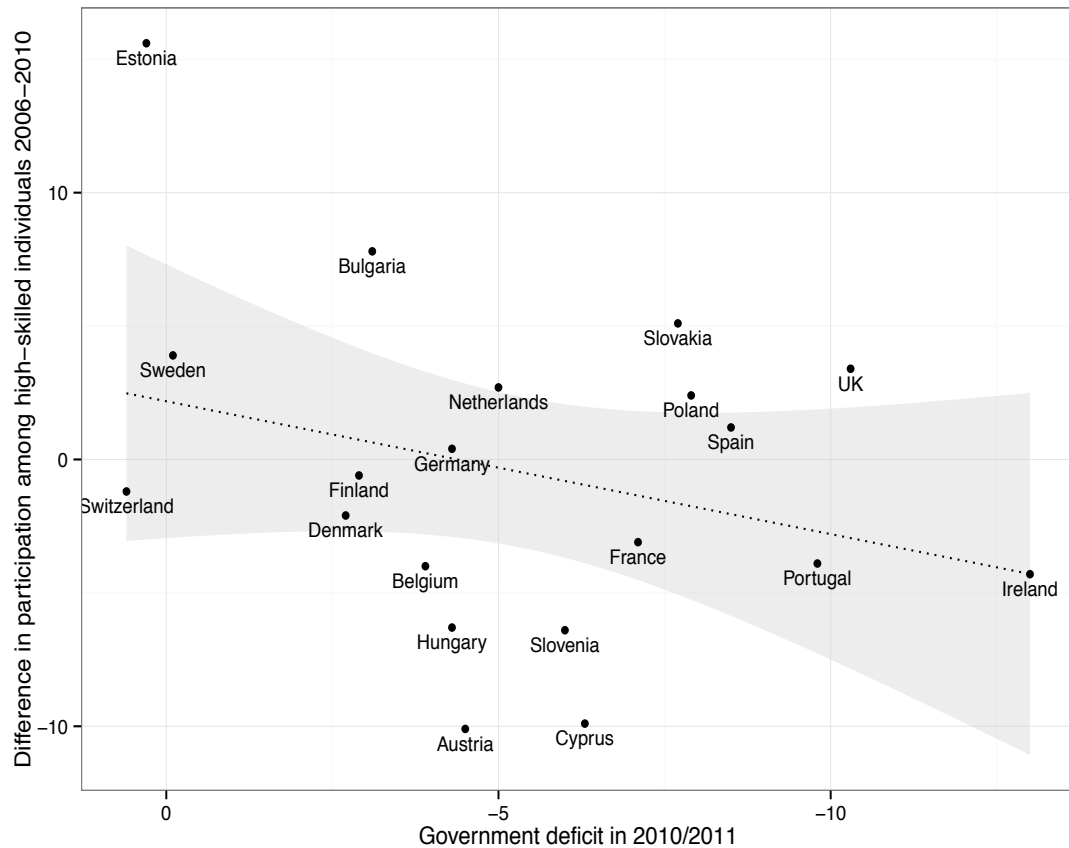


Figure 1: Government deficit and change in participation rates among high skilled individuals

Note: data on participation stems from the ESS waves 2006 and 2010.

Among the existing theoretical approaches to explain participation, we can distinguish between incentive- and resource-based arguments. With regard to incentive-based theories, most theories predict *mobilizing*, rather than demobilizing effects of economic hardship. Martin and Veiga (2012), for instance, argue that economic strain – both at the macroeconomic or the individual level - may create incentives for people to be more active politically, because the stakes increase and because they blame the government and want to make their discontent count at the polls (Martin and Veiga 2012). Similarly, Solt (2008) suggests a “conflict theory”, contending that increasing inequality exacerbates the divergences in political preferences between the economically disadvantaged and the more well off classes in society. This polarization is supposed to fuel political conflict about the right distribution of resources and thereby stimulate more interest and participation in the political process, whereas a more equal distribu-

tion of resources in the society should foster consensus and quiescence in society, resulting in lower levels of political engagement (Brady 2004). These theories have the merit to distinguish between different incentive structures for the rich and the poor, but they still arrive at the same conclusion: heightened economic strain raises the stakes of both groups in politics and should stimulate participation among both of them, a prediction that is clearly not in line with figure 1

There are indeed also incentive-based approaches that explain *withdrawal* from participation as a reaction to economic hardship, but these arguments focus only on individual-level hardship and imply that participation should remain largely unaffected among the better off. Rosenstone's (1982) argument on "economic adversity and voter turnout", e.g., goes in exactly this direction. He argues that in times of economic strain, the priorities of persons who suffer economic adversity shift towards more immediate concerns, at the expense of more abstract or "remote" concerns such as politics. The result is a demobilizing effect of economic downturns, by depressing participation among the economically vulnerable parts of society. Similarly, the "relative power theory" (Goodin and Dryzek 1980) postulates that increasing inequality concentrates power among the rich, which is why they more consistently prevail in political conflict, teaching the poorer citizens that their goals cannot be effectively pursued through the political process. Again, these incentive-models of withdrawal do not help us in making sense of declining turnout among the highly educated.

Finally, the most important line of theory and research on factors depressing participation is, of course, "resource-theory", which holds that relatively poorer individuals tend to abstain from political participation, because they lack time, money, social and cognitive skills to engage in politics (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, Gallego 2010). In other words, they abstain because they don't have the necessary resources to participate, not because they rationally decide to withdraw (which is the implication in the incentive-based models). Citizens with higher levels of resources, on the other hand, have the necessary resources, skills and psychological dispositions (interest and knowledge) to participate in politics anyway. Therefore, increasing inequality should depress participation among the

disadvantaged, while the participation of the upper classes is assumed to be stable and strong. The argument that increased hardship depresses, rather than strengthens, participation among the economically vulnerable is also shared in a wide range of studies on inequality and participation (Anderson and Beramendi 2011, Beramendi and Rueda 2011, Pontusson and Rueda 2010, Schäfer 2013).

As we could see from this short review of the literature, existing theories tend to explain variations in turnout mostly with regard to the (non-)participation of the more disadvantaged social strata (in terms of income, education or more general socio-economic resources), assuming that economically and cognitively more privileged citizens tend to participate strongly in any case. The positive link between social status and participation has been asserted mostly on the basis of cognitive arguments, i.e. with regard to education. The positive correlation between education and participation can be regarded as one of most solid evidence provided by the literature on political participation (Kam and Palmer 2008; Gallego 2010).

Hence, we are left with a striking puzzle: during the recent economic crisis, electoral turnout has declined *among the highly educated classes in most countries that have been severely hit by economic downturns* (see also Gubler 2013 for similar findings). The assumption that high levels of resources induce participation may no longer hold. Rather, there seems to be a hidden side to declining turnout that has so far been strongly neglected in theory and empirical research: what are the effects of the economic crisis on the better-off? Our argument engages with that question with a focus on the changing incentive structure they are exposed to.

3. The argument: electoral calculus under conditions of constrained government

The theorization of electoral calculus and incentive-based electoral behavior is probably most fully developed in the theory of economic voting, which holds that voters punish or reward the government in line with the course of the economy (Key 1966, Duch and Stevenson 2008, Fossati 2012). The empirical evidence for

the economic vote overall is somewhat inconclusive and effects are substantively small generally (Kayser and Peress 2013, Kayser and Wlezien 2010, Fraile and Lewis-Beck 2013). However, the great merit in this literature is the theorization that incentive-based electoral behavior is highly conditional: it matters more in certain (institutional) contexts than others and for certain individuals². More particularly relevant to our research question is the finding of Gomez and Wilson (2006), who showed that education is positively related to the likelihood that citizens evaluate their governments on the basis of the economic situation. This indicates that highly sophisticated voters are more sensitive to incentive-based electoral behavior. Additionally, one of the main findings of this literature holds that economic voting is a forceful explanatory framework only in contexts of clearly attributable government responsibility (Powell and Whitten 1993; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci 2012). If (highly sophisticated) voters understand that the responsibility for the course of the economy cannot be attributed clearly to a government party, economic performance does not predict vote choice. Hence, we build on this literature to theorize the behavior of sophisticated, rational voters in a context where accountability is severely constrained.

The contributions by Hellwig (Hellwig and Samuels 2007, Hellwig 2008) most explicitly take such context effects into account. Hellwig shows that economic voting is less prevalent in economically interdependent (“globalized”) countries, because citizens realize that the globalization-induced government constraints make it much harder to hold governments accountable for economic outcomes. However, even Hellwig theorizes only *vote choice*, not *vote participation*. The question why “an economic voter” would participate at all in an election under such circumstances remains unanswered. Participation is a question that the economic voting literature has hardly ever addressed, however³.

² More precisely, it has been shown that economic voting is more prevalent in contexts with higher levels of turnout (Bengtsson 2004) and with lower levels of aggregate party identification (Kayser and Wlezien 2010).

³ Indeed, most applications of economic voting theories do not address vote abstention at all, a fact that has already drawn a lot of criticism (Tillman 2008, Bengtsson 2004, Bohl and Kriesi 2013).

This is where we place our argument: we argue that constrained government affects individuals' expectations about the costs and benefits of voting, and we therefore argue that government constraints are consequential for citizens' willingness to engage in electoral participation, at all.

Indeed, governments in countries hard hit by the recent financial economic crisis are heavily constrained in their economic policy making capacity by the international financial markets, as well as European and international policy measures (Pontusson and Raess 2012). We maintain that constrained government works similar to macroeconomic variables in economic voting models: voters include the perception of their government's political and economic constraints into their consideration whether it is worth to go to the polls. It seems intuitive that once a person reaches the conclusion that the new government has only a small room to manoeuvre disregarded its ideological and coalitional composition (because of external and internal political and economic pressures), the willingness to bear the costs of voting (i.e. the investment in time it takes to acquire enough information for a decision and carry out the actual voting procedure) is likely to decrease. However this anticipation of political inefficacy of the government requires a high level of political sophistication and knowledge. Citizens with low levels of education still tend to turn to the national governments with their frustrations about the effects of increasingly globalized markets (Häusermann and Kriesi forthcoming). Therefore, government constraints are expected to weaken the otherwise positive effects of education on participation, thereby lowering participation rates among the highly educated.

There is an alternative explanation for declining turnout among the more highly educated in the literature, which is more structural and less cyclical than our own argument: political indifference, alienation or even disgust. Peter Mair (2006, 2013) has forcefully described the “hollowing of democracy” through both an increased cartelization of political parties and a declining macroeconomic leeway for politics. Schäfer (2012) and Offe (2012) argue in a similar direction. In such a reading, declining levels of participation among the more sophisticated part of the electorate would not be an expression of rational calculus, but a more

general, structural detachment from national-level partisan politics. We take this argument seriously, as the evidence on declining levels of citizen engagement are well known. However, we think that testing our argument over time (pre- mid- and post-crisis) allows us to distinguish the cyclical from the structural processes.

In sum, we expect that the politico-economic turmoil of the last years has altered the relationship between education and political participation. In times of crisis, education should be less strongly related to participation than in times of more relaxed constraints, since highly educated citizens are expected to include considerations about their government's room to manoeuvre into their pocketbook evaluations. In other words, we hypothesize an interaction effect: government constraints are expected to weaken the positive effect of education on electoral participation. This is what we will test in the remainder of this paper.

4. Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we use data from four European Social Survey (ESS) rounds (2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012) as well as several country-level data sources (for an overview, see Table A.1 in the appendix). The intersection of these data sources allows to conduct the analyses for 120'442 respondents in the following 28 countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, Slovenia, Slovak Republic, United Kingdom.⁴

Our main independent variable at the individual level, education, is based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). We recoded the more fine-grained classification provided from 2010 onwards so that it fits the 5-point scale used in the ESS waves up to the year 2008. The resulting measure of highest level of education ranges from "less than lower secondary school" to "tertiary degree".

⁴ Note that oftentimes not all ESS waves are available for a country.

In order to better isolate the impact of our main independent variables, we control for additional factors at the individual level that are likely to affect participation. To account for incentive-based electoral behavior in times of economic hardship, we include unemployment. Two demographic characteristics (age, gender) as well as income and interest in politics are included in the models (see Solt 2008). In the ESS, income is reported in deciles and the variable measuring political interest is based on a four-item scale. These items have been recoded so that higher values indicate more interest in politics.

We also made three specific changes on single variables in the ESS data. In Portugal, the level of income unfortunately was asked in a slightly different way than in the other countries, which results in a 12-item scale instead of the usual 10-item scale. We therefore had to rescale the variable for Portugal in order to include it into the models. In addition, we include the quadratic function of age into the analyses to account for life-cycle effects (see Blais et al. 2004). Age and age², finally, were rescaled by dividing age by 10 in order to improve the convergence of the model estimations.

At the country level, we consider three specific indicators of government constraint (see also figure 2 below). First, we anticipate a soaring public deficit to be a major aspect of a government's room to maneuver, since political and market pressures for austerity measures are likely to increase with the accumulation of public debt. We operationalize public deficit with the World Bank development indicator data, where it is defined as cash deficit in percentages of GDP.⁵ Second, conditionality as a result of bailouts by the *Troika* (i.e. the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)) can be perceived as important confining factor for the governments of affected countries.⁶ Third, not only political constraints can hamper the scope of governmental action, but also economic constraints. Most notably, we regard financial market pressures stemming from difficulties to issue government bonds

⁵ More precisely, revenue (including grants) minus expense, minus net acquisition of nonfinancial assets.

⁶ The countries are Bulgaria in 2006, Spain in 2012, Greece in 2010, Hungary in 2008 and 2010, Ireland in 2010 and 2012, Latvia in 2008, Portugal in 2012.

in order finance public activities as a challenge for suffering governments, not only because of the actual financial problems but also because of the accompanying media frenzy and public outcry. As indicator, we rely on the long-term interest rates for government bond yields as reported by the OECD and Eurostat. Obviously, the three variables are substantially correlated,⁷ which is why we decided to run separate models for the three indicators and a factor of the three indicators. The factor scores result from a varimax rotated maximum-likelihood factor analysis on the three single indicators. Figure 3 illustrates the development of these government constraints during the time span under consideration. The outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008 clearly reduced governmental leeway due to soaring levels of deficits, increasing bond yields and more widespread incidence of bailouts by the *Troika*. The constraints intensified in the aftermath of Lehman Brother's collapse, climaxed in 2010 and since then returned to a path of recovery.

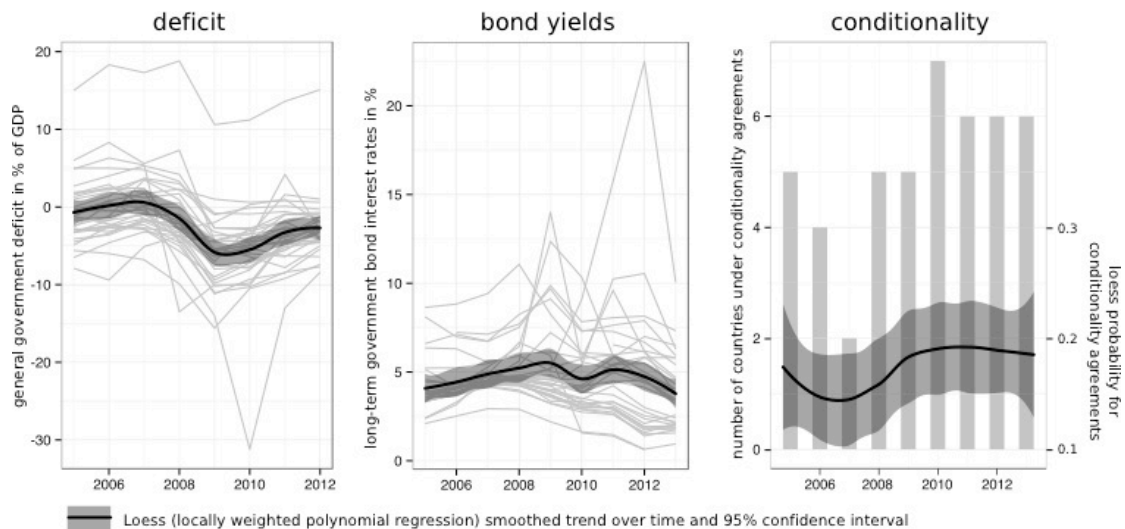


Figure 3: Macro level indicators used in the analysis

Finally, it is important to control for political covariates at the macro level. First, we include the GDP per capita at purchasing power parity into the calculations in order to control for general cross-sectional variance in terms of the severity of the economic crisis. Furthermore, we distinguish between more recently democratized countries in Eastern Europe and Western European countries, since the

⁷ Pearson's R of -0.38 (deficit and bond yields), -0.27 (deficit and conditionality) and 0.66 (bond yields and conditionality).

former show systematically lower turnout levels (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2013). Lastly, we consider party system polarization as potentially important. A high diversity of ideological party positions may well be connected to more participation, since the individuals' preferences are more likely to be represented by one or another party (Sartori 1976). All these macro indicators were added to the data set in the year the ESS rounds were fielded in the respective countries, which does not always correspond to the year indicated for the waves.

As for the calculations, we rely on hierarchical regression models including log-likelihood ratio tests comparing the models to the fit of the empty model as well as on simulations of the predicted probabilities and marginal effects. In addition, we ran a multitude of robustness checks on the fully specified model, which are reported in Table A.2 in the appendix. The checks include an outlier analysis (Greece with respect to government bond yields, Ireland with regards deficit), the exclusion of survey and sample weights, the exclusion of the indicator for income in light of the considerable collinearity with education, the inclusion of more fine-grained measures of social risk (part time work and temporary employment), the replacement of party system polarization with the effective number of parties as well as the consideration of country and year fixed effects instead of the multilevel specification. With the exception of income, none of these specifications led to substantial changes in the results. As for income, there are two possible reasons for the non-effect with regards the interaction between education and government constraint. First, the inclusion of income might be necessary for substantial reasons since we deal with financial indicators at the macro level. Second, as usual in survey analyses, the indicator for income contains a lot of missing data. Thus, we might have a systematic selection bias in the data.⁸

5. How constrained government affects the relationship between education and participation

⁸ The way to test for selection bias is to run the models on a data set with imputed missing data – something which certainly will be done in the near future.

Our empirical analysis is organized as follows. In a first step, we assess the general validity of our hypothesis regarding the political participation of high-skilled individuals in a large baseline model in which individuals are pooled over time and space. In a second step, we address the debate about whether a decline in participation reflects a general and structural long-term trend or whether it is indeed a direct consequence of the current economic hardship – and thus related to the proposed mechanism of constrained governments. For this purpose we calculate separate models for each year that allow us to identify potential time-varying dynamics in the propensity to vote depending among high skilled.

The estimated coefficients, standard errors and significance levels of our pooled baseline model are shown in Table 1. To support the substantial interpretation of these hierarchical logit regressions, we plot the simulated predicted probabilities for different levels of education in dependence on the indicators of government constraint in Figure 3 as well as the marginal effects of education in interaction with government constraint in Figure 4.⁹

⁹ We show the predicted probabilities and marginal effects with the control variables fixed at zero (dichotomous variables) as well as their mean (continuous variables).

Table 1: Hierarchical logit regression models predicting electoral participation

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
(Intercept)	-2.966*** (0.175)	-2.953*** (0.373)	-2.891*** (0.282)	-2.927*** (0.289)	-3.786*** (0.314)	-3.181*** (0.264)
Education	0.194*** (0.037)	0.160*** (0.008)	0.154*** (0.007)	0.214*** (0.013)	0.196*** (0.008)	0.164*** (0.007)
Unemployment	-0.428*** (0.035)	-0.406*** (0.035)	-0.353*** (0.030)	-0.353*** (0.030)	-0.356*** (0.030)	-0.357*** (0.030)
Age	0.774*** (0.029)	0.801*** (0.028)	0.778*** (0.024)	0.778*** (0.024)	0.772*** (0.024)	0.780*** (0.024)
Age ²	-0.048*** (0.003)	-0.051*** (0.003)	-0.051*** (0.002)	-0.051*** (0.002)	-0.050*** (0.002)	-0.051*** (0.002)
Gender (women) ^a	0.127*** (0.018)	0.110*** (0.018)	0.137*** (0.016)	0.137*** (0.016)	0.138*** (0.016)	0.136*** (0.016)
Hardly interested in politics ^b	0.725*** (0.024)	0.723*** (0.024)	0.775*** (0.020)	0.775*** (0.020)	0.778*** (0.020)	0.777*** (0.020)
Quite interested in politics ^b	1.386*** (0.027)	1.409*** (0.027)	1.451*** (0.022)	1.451*** (0.022)	1.453*** (0.022)	1.455*** (0.022)
Very interested in politics ^b	1.715*** (0.040)	1.744*** (0.040)	1.784*** (0.037)	1.784*** (0.037)	1.787*** (0.037)	1.790*** (0.037)
Income	0.075*** (0.004)	0.076*** (0.004)	0.072*** (0.003)	0.072*** (0.003)	0.074*** (0.003)	0.071*** (0.003)
Recent democratiza- tion (Eastern Europe) ^c		-0.659** (0.238)	-0.597** (0.225)	-0.597** (0.224)	-0.348 (0.242)	-0.574** (0.217)
GDP per capita		0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Party system polarization		0.617. (0.322)	0.356 (0.227)	0.353 (0.228)	0.481* (0.226)	0.963*** (0.237)
Government constraint		-0.037 (0.035)	0.019 (0.020)			
Government con- straintXEducation			-0.031*** (0.005)			
Deficit					0.059*** (0.006)	
DeficitXEducation					-0.013*** (0.001)	
Conditionality						0.024 (0.060)
ConditionalityX Education						-0.081*** (0.018)
Bond yield				0.008 (0.009)		
Bond yieldX Education				-0.013*** (0.002)		
N individuals	120442	120442	120442	120442	120442	120442
N countries	28	28	28	28	28	28
N years	4	4	4	4	4	4
LR-Test ^d	5298.2*** (df=18)	5092.4*** (df=16)	-9868.2*** (df=17)	-9821.0*** (df=17)	-9868.4*** (df=17)	-9872.6*** (df=17)

Notes: Unstandardized logit coefficients; standard errors in brackets. One-tailed significance tests, levels: *** p ≤ 0.001, ** p ≤ 0.01, * p ≤ 0.05. Reference categories: a=Male; b=Not at all inter-ested in politics; c=Western Europe. d=Likelihood ratio compared to empty model.

Model 1 shows a baseline specification in order to establish the validity of our mi-
cro-level operationalization. It consists of all individual level predictors, the multi-
level specification and a random slope for education. Over all countries, education

unsurprisingly picks up a large part of the variation in electoral participation in model 1. The increase of one unit in education changes the odds in favor of participation to 1.21.

The effects related to the control variables unemployment, age, interest in politics and income are highly significant and work in the direction as expected by extant studies on participation (e.g. Solt 2008, Gallego 2010). In contrast, the significant increase in the likelihood of voting for women compared to men (odds ratio of 1.14 – everything else equal) is noteworthy in light of the recent literature suggesting a narrowing of the gender divide in terms of participation (see Gallego 2006). The results therefore suggest that the crisis has reversed the traditionally higher willingness of men to vote, but, as for economic risk, a more extensive inspection of this relationship is beyond the scope of this study.

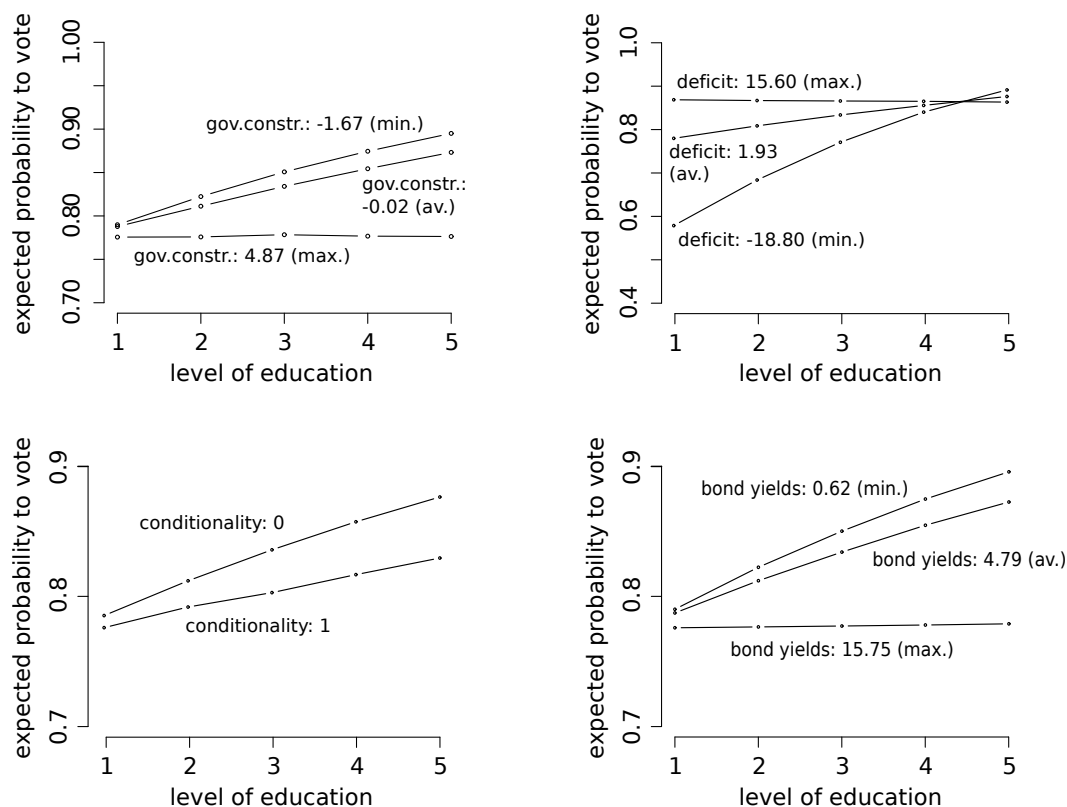


Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of electoral participation for different levels of education, depending on government constraint indicators

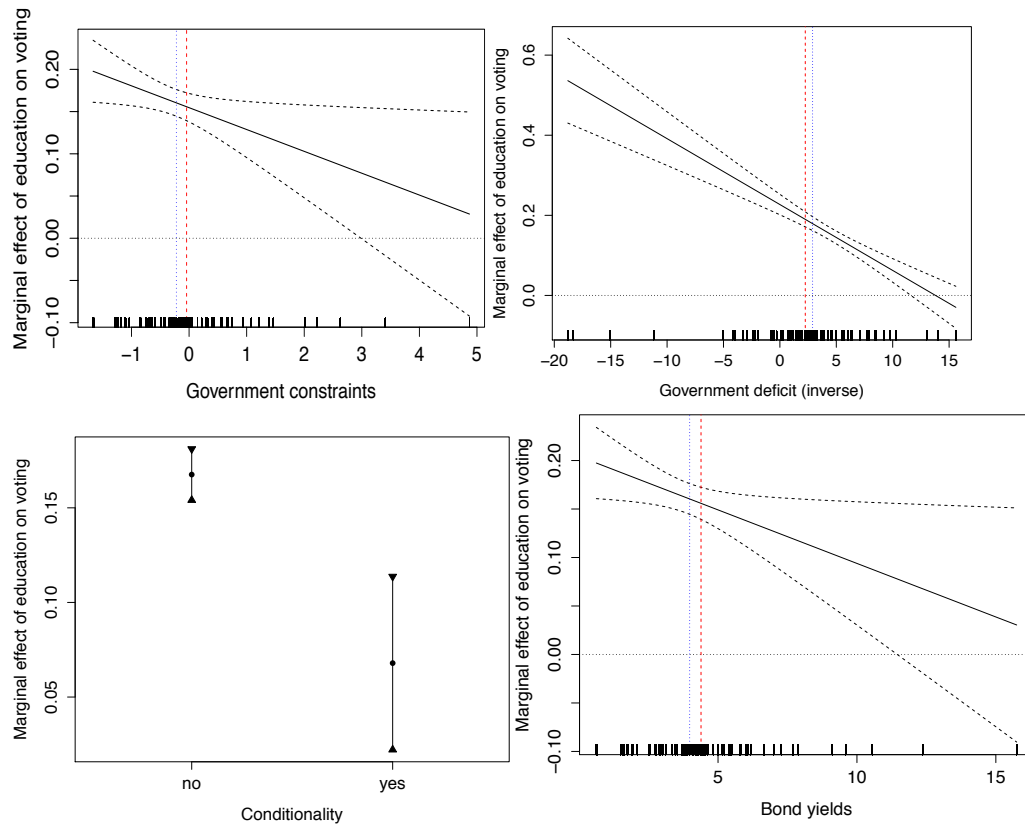


Figure 4: Estimated marginal effects of education if interacted with government constraint indicators

The contribution of these individual level predictors in the models 2 to 6 is highly consistent with the ones in model 1, which points to the robustness of our individual level specification. As for country level covariates, we introduce GDP per capita, the predictor controlling for countries with rather recent democratization (i.e. Eastern European states) and our main explanatory variable – the factor variable measuring different dimensions of government constraint (public deficit, government bond yields, and conditionality) – in model 2. The only country level variable, which – on the aggregate – is substantially related to turnout, is the dichotomous distinction between Eastern and Western European countries. Eastern Europeans have a systematically lower propensity to go to the ballots, which in the literature is mainly explained by frustration about corruption and the ramifications of communist legacies (see Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2013). As such, government constraint and GDP growth do not add explanatory power to the prediction. This is consistent with our initially discussed evidence on the seemingly inexistent relationship between the economic crisis and turnout levels.

In model 3 to 6, we test the interaction effects of different operationalizations of government constraint and education in a stepwise fashion. The main finding we want to emphasize here is that *government constraint substantially moderates the effect education has on participation*. The graphs in Figure 2 show that in countries where public deficit, government bond yields and conditionality work in favor of a governments room to maneuver, education is related to an increase in the predicted probability of around 10 percentage points (or even 20 percentage points in the case of deficit). In countries with an average strength of government constraint, the positive effect of education is slightly moderated. The crucial difference occurs with regard to the countries with a strongly constrained government, namely Greece, Portugal, Hungary and Ireland in our sample. Here, education ceases to have an effect on participation. This is confirmed by the visualization of the marginal effects in Figure 3. At a level of about 3 of our factor for constrained government – which separates the heavily constrained countries from the other countries –, the positive relationship of education on participation becomes insignificant. According to our argumentation, this outcome is the effect of pessimistic expectations by the better educated on the leverage their vote has with regards to government effectiveness.

We believe that government constraint during the economic and financial crisis of the last years is a complex occurrence shaped by several aspects of the domestic and international politico-economic context. Nevertheless, the graphs in Figure 2 and 3 show that the single indicators of our government constraint indicator have the same moderating effect on the education-participation nexus. The higher the levels of constraints, i.e. the more restricted the maneuvering room of governments, the smaller the generally positive effect of education on electoral participation. At severe levels of constraints, the high skilled even fully cease being more likely to go the ballots. For example, at a public deficit of about –10% or below education entirely loses the explanatory power it usually has. Likewise, conditionality in the context of international financial agreements substantially lowers the propensity of individuals with upper secondary level education or higher.). It has to be emphasized that, although we have only a few countries in the sample with severe levels of government constraint, the effects are not systematically driven by single cases. The exclusion of outliers – Ireland in the model estimating the effect of public deficit as well as

Greece in the model including government bond yields – does neither affect the significance nor the direction of the effect of government constraint on the relationship between education and participation.

The first part of this empirical analysis thus provides strong evidence of decreasing participation levels among high skilled in certain countries. However, the question whether our findings indeed reflect deliberate individual reactions to economic strain or rather display ramifications of a general long-term trend remains an open one so far. If the declining willingness to vote in elections is in fact based on the mechanism proposed here, then we should see varying patterns of participation among high-skilled over time. The very extent of government constraints differs considerably across time (see Figure 2) and so should thus the reaction of well-informed voters. We therefore computed hierarchical regression models for each year in our data set separately. The time span from 2006 until 2012 allows us to re-examine the proposed interaction effects for pre- as well as post-crisis years, which goes hand in hand with different levels of government constraints. Table 2 displays year-specific coefficients, standard errors and significance levels of the model specified in the above.¹⁰ In line with our theoretical expectation as well as with the development of government constraints over time (Figure 2), the proposed mechanism is only significant in the year 2010 – arguably the year when deficits, bond yields and the activism of the *Troika* peaked. In contrast, we do neither find significantly moderated participation levels for the high skilled in pre-crisis years nor in the recent past when European economies started a slow recovery.

¹⁰ We only show results of one measure for government constraints, the factor resulting from the other three indicators, noting that the application of alternative indicators yields very similar effects.

Table 1: Hierarchical logit regression models predicting electoral participation by year

	2006	2008	2010	2012
(Intercept)	-3.134*** (0.857)	-2.807*** (0.725)	-2.105* (0.822)	-2.883*** (0.663)
Education	0.132*** (0.020)	0.184*** (0.015)	0.133*** (0.015)	0.186*** (0.017)
Unemployment	-0.336*** (0.074)	-0.382*** (0.071)	-0.558*** (0.062)	-0.339*** (0.055)
Age	0.865*** (0.057)	0.917*** (0.052)	0.654*** (0.053)	0.760*** (0.049)
Age2	-0.056*** (0.006)	-0.064*** (0.005)	-0.036*** (0.005)	-0.047*** (0.005)
Gender (women) ^a	0.156*** (0.036)	0.104** (0.034)	0.160*** (0.034)	0.031 (0.032)
Hardly interested in politics ^b	0.700*** (0.047)	0.764*** (0.046)	0.786*** (0.043)	0.665*** (0.041)
Quite interested in politics ^b	1.412*** (0.053)	1.354*** (0.049)	1.507*** (0.049)	1.400*** (0.046)
Very interested in politics ^b	1.737*** (0.081)	1.858*** (0.078)	1.734*** (0.072)	1.697*** (0.070)
Income	0.111*** (0.010)	0.055*** (0.007)	0.062*** (0.007)	0.082*** (0.006)
Recent democratization (Eastern Europe) ^c	-0.871* (0.437)	-1.198** (0.399)	-0.743* (0.350)	-0.659* (0.285)
GDP per capita	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Party system polarization	2.855. (1.715)	2.234 (1.603)	0.578 (1.461)	0.773 (1.326)
Government constraint	0.882 (0.650)	0.113 (0.197)	0.196* (0.098)	0.111 (0.111)
Government constraintX Education	0.065 (0.069)	-0.027 (0.025)	-0.034** (0.013)	-0.015 (0.016)
N individuals	25697	29925	31990	32830
N countries	19	21	23	24
LR-Test ^d	1164.4*** (df=16)	1202.9*** (df=16)	1324.7*** (df=16)	1432.2*** (df=16)

Notes: Unstandardized logit coefficients; standard errors in brackets. One-tailed significance tests, levels: *** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$. Reference categories: a=Male; b=Not at all interested in politics; c=Western Europe. d=Likelihood ratio compared to empty model.

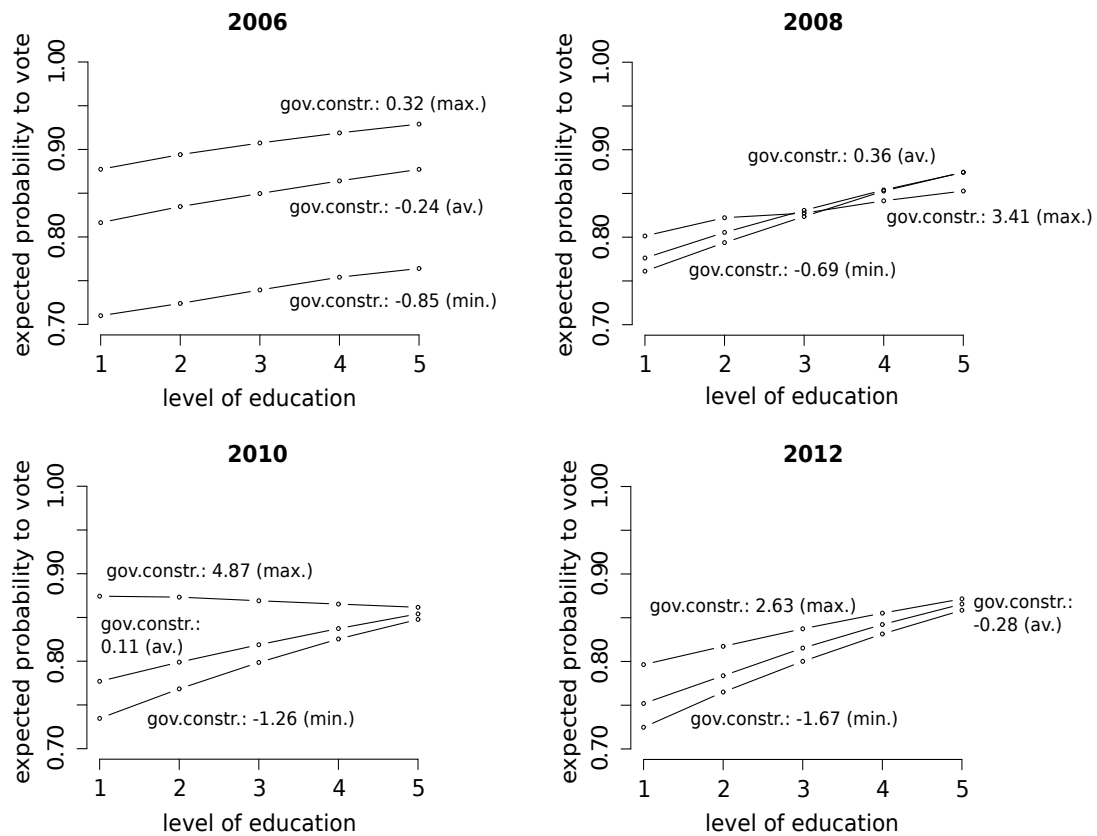


Figure 5: Predicted probabilities of electoral participation for different levels of education over time, depending on government constraints

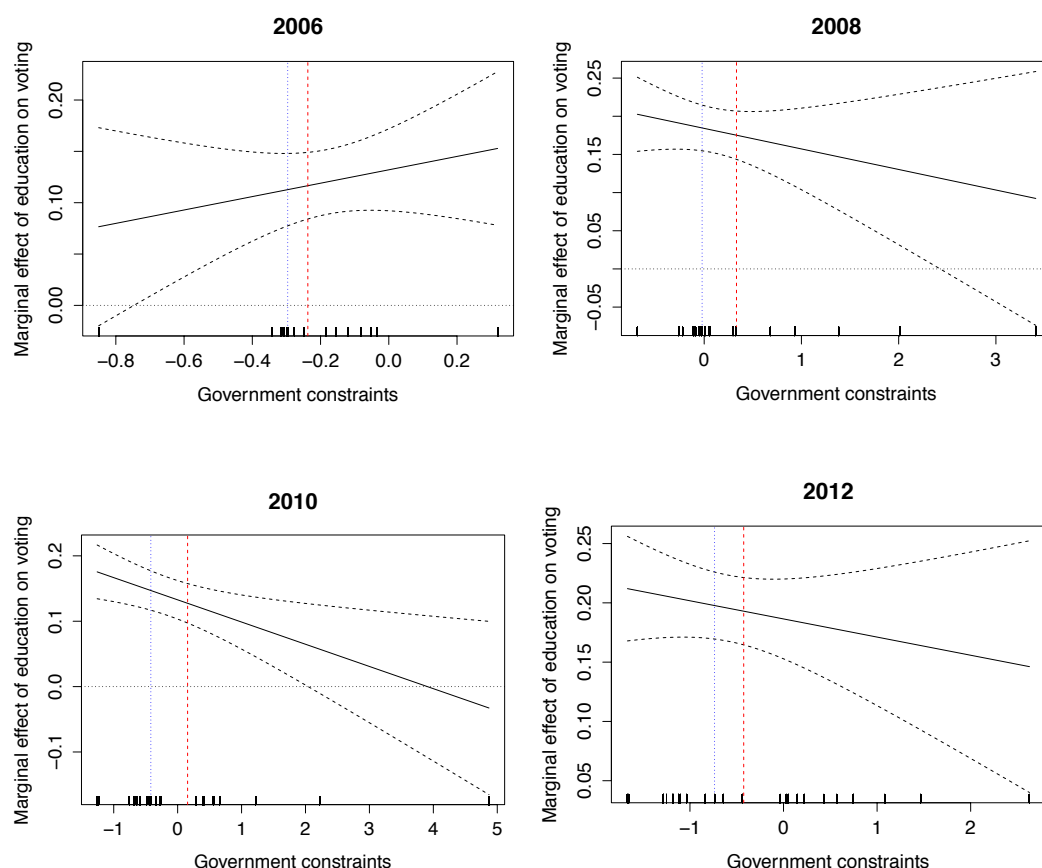


Figure 6: Estimated marginal effects of education if interacted with government constraints over time

Figures 5 and 6 lend confidence to these findings and allow for a more detailed evaluation of the underlying dynamic aspect of our argumentation. As expected, in pre-crisis years (upper left graph in Figure 5) the three slopes are virtually parallel (i.e. no interaction effect) and reveal a generally increasing probability to vote with increasing levels of education – just as standard theory would predict. However, this positive slope vanishes as soon as governments face higher levels of constraints due to the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008. The high skilled presumably anticipate the reduced maneuvering room for domestic politicians in an environment of economic hardship and cease being more diligent voters compared to the low skilled. This effect is most pronounced in the year 2010 and slightly recedes in the most recent wave of the ESS. Hence, the change in participation among the highly educated developed in tandem with the constraints. Figure 6 displays marginal effects of edu-

cation on voting dependent on different levels of government constraints and gives further credence to the dynamic pattern in line with our theoretical expectations. The apparent time-varying effects regarding the high-skilled citizen's propensity to vote revealed in this chapter are hard to reconcile with an explanation based on a general decrease of political interest among this segment of society. Political indifference and alienation are relatively stable attitudes and unlikely to change within a few years only. Rather, the observed shifts in attitudes among high-skilled support our argumentation of a cyclical trend closely related to the current economic situation. These findings thus support our argumentation of highly educated and well-informed citizens who anticipate their government's inefficacy in the face of significantly reduced political autonomy. The choice to deliberately refrain from voting in times of economic strain appears as a plausible option for all those who are equipped with the cognitive resources to understand the immediate implications and consequences of constraint governments.

7. Conclusion

While an increasing literature studies the policy reactions in the political aftermath of the great recession, studies on the effect of the crisis on the political behaviour of individuals is still very rare. In engaging in this research question, it seems crucial to distinguish different social groups, who are affected very unequally by the crisis and whose reaction to different sets of grievances and constraints are likely to differ. This is why in this paper, we have distinguished theoretical mechanisms and empirical effects for the group of highly educated individuals, whose level of turnout in national elections has dropped in many crisis-affected countries. None of the existing theories of political participation can account for such a drop, since they all assume economically and cognitively more privileged citizens to participate strongly in any context. In contrast to these expectations, we showed that with increasing political and economic austerity pressures weighting on their government, better educated voters tend to abstain from the polls just as much or even more so than less educated persons. Where public deficit, government bond yields and conditionality work in favor of a government's room to manoeuvre, higher levels of education are related to a higher propensity to vote – just as the usual expectations in the participation literature

would anticipate. By contrast, when government is severely constrained, the effect of education on participation weakens strongly and becomes even in significant under the circumstances of high bond yields and high public deficits.

We explained this finding with a rationalist argument: once a person reaches the conclusion that the new government has only a small room to manoeuvre disregarded its ideological and coalitional composition, the willingness to bear the costs of voting is likely to decrease. Yet, this anticipation of political inefficacy of the government requires a high level of political sophistication and knowledge. The full political repercussions caused by soaring public deficits, high government bond yield rates or the conditionality induced by financial agreements can be quite complex and difficult to foresee. This is why we formulate this theoretical model only with regard to the highly educated citizens. In other words, we showed that constraint government works similar to macroeconomic variables in economic voting models: highly sophisticated voters include their government's political and economic constraints into their calculus whether it is worth to go to the polls.

The alternative explanation for declining turnout among the more highly educated refers to indifference, alienation or even disgust with partisan politics in contemporary democracies. In this line of argumentation, declining levels of participation among the more sophisticated part of the electorate would not be an expression of rational calculus, but a more general, structural detachment from national-level partisan politics. We have addressed this concern by testing our argument over time (pre- mid- and post-crisis), in order to distinguish the cyclical from the structural processes. Our results show that the effects of education on participation co-evolve with the development of constraints: before the crisis, government constraints did not depress the effect of education on participation significantly, and the effect weakened again when the constraints relaxed. Hence, the change in participation among the highly educated developed in line with the constraints. We take this as evidence for the fact that structural disengagement with partisan politics does not account for the full picture of declining participation among the highly educated citizens.

In sum, our findings show that the effect of government constraints, besides other non-electoral consequences, leads to shifts in the composition of the electorate. This, of course, has important normative ramifications on the democratic quality of elections. On the one hand, a moderation of participatory inequalities caused by education should be welcomed, since this improves the representativeness of elections. On the other hand, if overall participation decreases, this posits a challenge to the legitimacy of electoral contests. Therefore, more equal participation at lower levels in the end does not seem desirable from a theoretical-normative perspective.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Micro level indicators used in the analysis

Variable	Operationalization	Mean	Standard Deviation
<i>Education</i>	First digit of variable <i>edulvlb</i> in ESS 5. "What is the highest level of education you have successfully completed?" Five-point scale.	3.10	1.33
<i>Unemployment</i>	Based variable <i>mnactic</i> in ESS "Main activity, last 7 days". Recoded so that "unemployed, looking for job" and "unemployed, not looking for a job" are counted as unemployed.	0.06	0.24
<i>Gender</i>	Based on variable <i>gndr</i> in ESS. "Sex of respondent" Recoded so that (0=men, 1=women)	0.54	0.50
<i>Age</i>	Based on variable <i>agea</i> in ESS. "Age of respondent, calculated"	48.2	18.57
<i>Interest</i>	Based on variable <i>polintr</i> in ESS. "How interested would you say you are in politics – are you...?" Recoded so that (1="not at all interested in politics", 4="very interested in politics")	2.64	0.91
<i>Income</i>	Based on variable <i>hinctnta</i> in ESS. "Household's total net income, all sources (in deciles)"	5.50	2.78

Table A.2: Robustness checks on the fully specified model (interaction between education and government constraint factor)

	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>Std.Error</i>	<i>Pr(> z)</i>
<i>No weights</i>			
Education	0.153	0.007	***
Government constraints	0.019	0.020	
EducationXGovernment constraint	-0.031	0.005	***
<i>Without interest in politics</i>			
Education	0.265	0.008	***
Government constraints	0.043	0.046	
EducationXGovernment constraint	-0.031	0.012	**
<i>Without income</i>			
Education	0.199	0.008	***
Government constraints	0.009	0.046	
EducationXGovernment constraint	-0.019	0.012	
<i>Country and year fixed effects</i>			
Education	0.154	0.008	***
Government constraints	0.023	0.033	
EducationXGovernment constraint	-0.027	0.009	**
<i>Effective number of parties instead of party system polarization</i>			
Education	0.154	0.009	***
Government constraints	0.012	0.045	
EducationXGovernment constraint	-0.028	0.012	*
<i>Additional measures of social risk (part time and temporary employment)</i>			
Education	0.162	0.009	***
Government constraints	0.077	0.050	
EducationXGovernment constraint	-0.034	0.013	**
<i>Outliers excluded</i>			
Education	0.157	0.009	***
Government constraints	0.111	0.046	*
EducationXGovernment constraint	-0.023	0.012	.
<i>Additional social risk indicators</i>			
Education	0.154	0.009	***
Government constraints	0.030	0.047	
EducationXGovernment constraint	-0.026	0.012	*

Notes: Only main effects shown. Significance codes: *** = 0.001, ** = 0.01, * = 0.05, . = 0.1